



New Voices: What Works

Lessons From Funding Five Years of Community News Startups

*By Jan Schaffer, J-Lab Executive Director
Funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation*

Meet the New Voices Grantees...

Coconut Grove youth group

2009: Grand Avenue News

2009: New Era News

2009: Grosse Pointe Today

2009: The Austin Bulldog

2009: Oakland Local

2009: Intersections: The South L.A. Reporting Project

2008: Stories That Fly

New Voices

2008: Family Life Behind Bars

2008: 10 Valley

2008: Mi-Whi News

2008: VetVenue

2008: Green Jobs Philly

2008: Lexington Commons

2008: KBUT Immigration

2008: Appalachian Independent

New Voices

2007: The Eminent Domain

2007: New Castle NOW

2007: Anansi's Web

2007: Nuestra Tahoe

2007: Listen Up! Northwest

2007: Greater Fulton News

2007: Neighbor Media

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By Jan Schaffer, J-Lab Executive Director

New Voices is a pioneering program that awards small grants to seed the launch of innovative community news ventures in the United States and explores models for sustainability. It is funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and administered by J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism at American University's School of Communication.

New Voices projects have won accolades and awards, filled gaps in news coverage, informed voters and increased voter turnout, spun into new projects, trained citizens to be journalists, mentored other local news startups, produced award-winning faculty research, upended journalism school curricula – and garnered begrudging respect from local officials.

Rarely did they replace coverage that had vanished from legacy news outlets – or even aspire to. Instead, they very much added news and information where there was none before.

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Introduction

The Forum, the five-year-old, all-volunteer news site in Deerfield, N.H., now counts more than 350 contributors, posts 50 articles a week, and its readers assert they are “better educated” than regular newspaper readers about state and local government.

The Twin Cities Daily Planet, also launched in 2005, just added a corps of 12 neighborhood correspondents to its 100 media partners and bloggers as it morphs its mission to become a “community information center” to help neighborhood residents share, connect and collaborate.

New Castle NOW in the town of New Castle, N.Y., had 60,000 unique visitors as of the first 10 months of its third year. The site housed 3,450 articles and sold \$90,000 in advertising.

Oakland Local is demonstrating how well-friended founders can use Facebook, Twitter and other social media tools to hook 309,500 unique visitors in its first year of existence.

Meanwhile, Oakland Local is ushering in the next era of community news startups, demonstrating how well-friended founders with high media skills can use Facebook, Twitter and other social media tools to hook 309,500 unique visitors to a hyperlocal news site in its first year of existence.

These are some of the snapshots of community news startups that have emerged five years after the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation funded J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism to create New Voices, a pioneering program to award small grants to seed the launch of innovative community news ventures in the United States and explore models for sustainability.

Through 2010, New Voices grants have been awarded to 55 local news projects from a pool of 1,433 applicants. All were required either to have nonprofit status or a fiscal agent. This reports examines the outcomes of the 46 projects that were launched with New Voices funding from mid-2005 through mid-2010. Nine additional grantees, announced in May 2010, will be debuting their sites over the next 10 months.

Simply put, we examined what worked and what didn't, what made for robust sites or led to disappointment. We offer tips to help other startups and recommendations for Knight and other foundations based on what J-Lab has learned in mentoring these startups.



ForumHome.org



TCDailyPlanet.net



NewCastleNOW.org



OaklandLocal.com

Overview

Since 2005, the New Voices grantees have traveled the arc of media innovation. They sought to report community news via blogs, podcasts, wikis, “citizen” journalism and social media, in addition to websites, community radio and cable access television.

They have won accolades and awards, filled gaps in news coverage, informed voters and increased voter turnout, spun into new projects, trained citizens to be journalists, mentored other local news startups, produced award-winning faculty research, upended journalism school curricula – and garnered begrudging respect from local officials, putting them on notice that media-empowered citizens were starting to pay attention.

In every case they sought to cover news and information that was not being covered in their communities by other news media. ***Rarely did they replace coverage that had vanished from legacy news outlets – or even aspire to. Instead, they very much added news and information where there was none before.***

Not even in the heyday of American journalism did the New Voices communities receive the kinds of hyperlocal news and information and opportunities for community connection that their New Voices projects supplied.

As important, they built new connections within their communities as they defined news in new and important ways.

“It certainly built a community inside Hartsville,” said Doug Fisher, founder of Hartsville Today in South Carolina.

“We definitely raised awareness about community events. And we also provided a much needed reflection of the communities we covered,” said Courtney Lowery, co-founder of Montana’s Rural News Network, which created both the Dutton Country Courier and CrowNews.net.

The 46 grantees launched 48 projects. Of these 48, 42 are still online. Of those 42 sites, 32 – or 76 percent – are still being actively updated. Two others have made occasional updates in recent months.

Three of the active projects launched, stalled, and then rose from the dead after solving either web development or staffing problems – a testament to their ongoing desire to cover their communities. But they also typified the struggles that several youth media, community radio and university-led New Voices projects faced as they tried to do community news.

The most robust projects operate year-round and regularly post new content, even if the founders do most of it themselves. Many, like GreatLakesEcho.org, also found

clever ways to engage their audiences. In every case, they are driven by people – be they individual citizens, former “traditional journalists” or university faculty members – who have a passion for the enterprise and made a significant personal investment.

The less robust projects were plagued by frequent turnover of key people or technological problems that delayed their launch. They update less frequently and struggle to generate content. Sometimes, they over-relied on training citizen journalists.

Projects funded from 2005 through 2008 received \$12,000 to launch in the first year; they were awarded \$5,000 in the second year – if they matched it with other funds. All but one of the 46 projects received their Year Two matching grants. Projects funded in

2009 and 2010 received \$17,000 the first year and were eligible for \$8,000 in matching funds the second year.

The findings in this report were assembled from a variety of sources, including grantee progress reports, email correspondence, J-Lab monitoring and interviews, self-evaluations, a survey, and presentations at New Voices grantee meetings and journalism gatherings.

To be sure, our findings are based on a small universe – the work of our grantees. However, we know from our work in this field that other community news sites have experienced the same learning curves as the New Voices projects. We’ll elaborate on our findings later in this report. To start, here are 10 key takeaways:

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10 Key Takeaways

- ▶ **Engagement is key:** Robust and frequent content begets more content and whets the interest of potential contributors. The sites that have engaged their communities in multiple ways show the most promise.
- ▶ **Citizen journalism is a high-churn, high-touch enterprise:** Citizen journalism math is working out this way: Fewer than one in 10 of those you train will stick around to be regular contributors. Even then, they may be “regular” for only a short period of time. Projects that expected to generate content by training a corps of citizen journalists had to develop alternative plans for stories or they struggled with little compelling content.
- ▶ **Sweat equity counts for a lot:** Projects built on the grit and passion of a particular founder or corps of founders have created the most robust models for short- and long-term sustainability.
- ▶ **Community news sites are not a business yet:** While many all-volunteer sites are showing great promise for sustainability, other site founders want to develop their sites as a sustainable business that can pay staff or contributors.
- ▶ **Social media is game changing:** Facebook, Twitter and other social media tools are ushering in a New Age for Community News, creating robust recruiting, marketing, distribution, collaboration, reporting and funding opportunities.
- ▶ **Technology can be a blessing and a curse:** Community news sites would not exist without the tech tools for building easy websites and creating digital content. However, efforts to build custom websites led to frequent and lengthy delays and repeated advice to start simply.
- ▶ **Legacy news outlets are not yet in the game:** Projects that counted on partnerships with legacy news outlets ultimately found it best to go it alone as newsroom cutbacks left editors with no time to partner. Once launched, though, the New Voices projects found that partners came knocking.
- ▶ **The academic calendar is not good enough:** University-led projects built with student journalists need to operate year-round to avoid losing momentum and community trust. They hold great promise but must surmount great hurdles.
- ▶ **Youth media should be supplemental:** Projects that sought to train middle or high school students to report on news in their community produced infrequent content and fell prey to high trainer turnover and a need for great supervision. They should be secondary or tertiary, not primary, generators of content.
- ▶ **Community radio needs help:** While showing promise as community news outlets, community radio as well as cable access television stations need additional support and stable project leadership to deliver daily newscasts.

It is always hard to measure a moving target. The New Voices projects continue to adapt to their realities and most have demonstrated a hearty resilience. Several continue to confound our expectations – in good ways. Although we cite numerous specific examples, these anecdotes reflect overall experiences. It must also be noted that J-Lab, over the last five years, has evolved, too, adjusting some of rules of the road to foster success.

While sustainability is a key interest of J-Lab and the Knight Foundation, we also examine, as a measure of success, other markers of community impact and meeting community information needs.

The New Voices projects continue to adapt to their realities and continue to confound our expectations - in good ways.

While the majority of the New Voices grantees judged their efforts to be both successful and sustainable, we pose an overarching question:

What if it's more important for a community's demand for news and information to be whetted and sustained by a community news venture rather than for a particular community news site to operate continuously?

It is too early to tell, but we would expect that if a robust New Voices site faltered in the future, the community would see to it that another takes its place. ■

Profiles in Sustainability

The Forum: All-Volunteer Sustainability

In the 2005 town elections for Deerfield, a small town in southeastern New Hampshire, of the 22 positions on the ballot only 14 had candidates and only two were contested.

"The same people were controlling the towns over and over again. If there were [new] candidates, there was no way to find out what they thought, what their opinions were," said former schoolteacher Maureen Mann. "We sat around and said: 'We need a newspaper.'"

So, a core group of volunteers asked the local public library to be their fiscal agent and applied for a New Voices grant. "If we did get it, we had no idea what we were going to do with it when it came," Mann said.

The grant was announced in May 2005 and The Forum [forumhome.org] went online in August with four contributors and eight articles. Now, five years later, the site is a model of sustainability for an all-volunteer operation.

The site now covers Deerfield and three surrounding towns. It averages more than 50 original articles a week and has a roster of more than 350 people who have contributed news, articles, photos, columns, art and literature to the site. More than 50 of these contribute on a regular basis.

The site focuses on local news, regional issues, town meetings and boards, state government, arts and prep sports because local school students are bused to Manchester. They publish three print editions a year: Spring and Fall election issues and a Summer events issue, which are mailed to every address in the four towns.

The site has focused on persuading rather than training citizen journalists. "One of the biggest things we had to do was educate people: 'You're the reporter,'" said Mann, who spearheaded the launch.

The site has since been awarded its own nonprofit 501(c)(3) status. The managing editor receives a small monthly stipend and an ad sales person works on commission. Advertising revenue now covers the cost

of printing and mailing the print editions. Their first annual membership drive exceeded their goals. An annual meeting for all members is held in November.

How do they measure success? The site has received more than 3.5 million hits since it launched. The School Board and Select Board now seek out coverage. The local police departments send crime reports. Recreation departments and libraries submit articles.

Serving 16,000 households in the four towns, the site gets more than 3,000 unique visitors per month who view nearly 65,000 pages; 69 percent of readers visit daily and 43 percent visit more than once a day.

The site has also surmounted another difficult hurdle for many startups: It has handed off leadership to a new group of volunteers after Mann was elected state representative. She continues to report for The Forum. She acknowledges that it was hard to let go.

Giving up control of "my baby" to a new managing editor and Board of Directors was the most unexpected challenge. "I grit my teeth and let go," she said. ■

The Forum

Serving the Four Towns of Deerfield, Northwood, and North Ferrisburgh

The Forum • P.O. Box 476 • Deerfield NH • 03037 • Contact us at news@forumhome.org • Free Subscriptions

We have raised \$1530 of our \$3500 fundraising goal!

Visit our donor page and learn how you can donate.

Election Print Edition in the Works

Order Single Sep 11, 2010

Since we are working on the Election Print Edition of The Forum, the deadline for all materials is October 4 and the delivery date is late October. We are looking for photos and news items to share with every household in Candia, Northwood and North Ferrisburgh, please send it along. Our Calendar of Events at week of October through the holidays. So if your business or a special event planned for the holiday season, please send the news@forumhome.org.

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and photographs are always welcome - it's your chance to be a part of the history of the town. If you have a photo, please send it to news@forumhome.org.

donors, please submit a candidate's statement. We are also publishing lists regarding the candidates and the elections, please send news@forumhome.org.

you, the community, to help with financial support. If you can be a business interested in reaching every household in our four towns, please contact us at news@forumhome.org.

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Time to Apply for Fuel Assistance

Since Sept. 1, 2010, Deerfield residents are eligible to apply for fuel assistance. As we close out our first year of the summer season, it's time to think about winter heating bills. Assistance for the 2010-2011 winter fuel assistance is currently being accepted. You may call 1-800-828-5888 to set up your appointment. To qualify, you must (1) be responsible for paying heating bills in an energy efficient manner, (2) have a total household income that falls below the state's income guidelines for one month prior to application. (Source)

Johnson Highway Now Official

The Forum

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Cruise Night at Lion's Paradise

Sept 18, 2010

A lot of antique and classic cars, and the idea of going back to the community, opened the idea of Cruise Night at Lion's Paradise in Northwood. On Tuesday night, weather permitting, during the late spring until the end of September, you will see as many as 25-30 antique and classic cars in Lion's parking lot, and across the street to the Lion's empty lot. (Source)

2010 Primary Results - Northwood

Results are unofficial. Nominating names for the town in 2010, for the district in 2010.

Party	First Name	Last Name	Address	City	State	Zip	Phone	Email
Democrat	Frank	Emery	25					

603-463-7778

Meet Your Local Representative

Frank Emery (D)

603-463-7778

Meet Your Local Representative

Frank Emery (D)

603-463-7778

Measures of Success

If we were to measure the New Voices projects by mainstream media's or venture capitalists' measures of success, we'd look at how much money they raised or how many unique visitors they had.

It is no small achievement that the 46 projects leveraged the \$833,000 in New Voices grant funds into at least \$1.44 million in other grants, donations and advertising revenue. This does not count hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of in-kind donations: faculty time and other university support, AmeriCorps VISTA workers, office space, technology, pro bono legal advice and other services.

Still, most of that – \$760,000 – was brought in by one project, TC Daily Planet and it was mostly from grants. Others are now moving more aggressively to find monetary support – although not all really want to.

At least one, New Castle NOW, located in an affluent New York City bedroom community, brought in \$90,000 in ad revenue from 73 advertisers in less than three years. But ad sales are not a primary focus of the founders whose real passions are covering the school board, community development and town meetings. And the town's retail environment, with a main street of tony boutiques, was unique among the New Voices grantees and not replicable in many places.

We believe it is too much for these sites, with only micro-funding, to build a website, populate it with content, launch it, trigger community impact and attract major support to be fully sustainable after only two years.

It is too much for these sites, with only micro-funding, to build a website, populate it with content, launch it, trigger community impact and attract major support to be fully sustainable after only two years.

Investors in newly launched news sites, such as TBD.com, are figuring on at least three years to profitability. Nevertheless, the majority of the New Voices sites aspire to be sustainable, and they are doggedly moving to leverage their service to their community into dollar support.

Many of the New Voices projects have achieved excellent traffic. One project, New Era News, a politics blog by young Coloradans, leveraged its interns' network of friends to juice 6,000 unique visits and 44,000 page views in just its first month. But many others consider 1,000 or fewer monthly unique visitors to be just fine for their small communities. As important is the *kind*, not just the number, of eyeballs as town officials or candidates running for office sought out the sites as important platforms for their news. Also, many sites are getting more than 50 percent of their traffic from search engines even though they have only minimal search-engine-optimization skills.

Four of the projects – Grand Avenue News in Coconut Grove, Fla.; Rural Route 7 in Coolville and Tupper Plains, Ohio; Nuestro Tahoe on the north shore of Lake Tahoe; and Deerfield's Forum – found they needed to offer their low-bandwidth communities print editions as well, an expensive undertaking.

Because of the diversity of projects funded, ranging from rural to metro areas, from university-led to all-volunteer projects, we see other measures of impact and success we think should be injected into any conversation about local media. They are important markers for serving community information needs. So, we pose some additional questions:

Did the New Voices projects give a community regular coverage that either never existed before or was, at best, episodic?

Some studies have criticized community news projects for not replacing the kind of news no longer covered by downsized news organizations. But we aver that one of the most important contributions of all of the New Voices projects is not that they replaced coverage that has been constricted, rather they added coverage that did not exist before. They have not only covered news but also addressed information needs or provided connections that were missing.

In several instances, they even juiced mainstream media to add coverage or link to their reports.

The Appalachian Independent, which reports news for the little-covered rural community around Frostburg, Md., has written about difficult racial issues never before reported. Greater Fulton News covers minority communities that got little news coverage in Richmond, Va. Intersections: South Los Angeles, USC Annenberg's effort to cover a once riot-torn area near the school, has built news and mentoring entrance ramps into the community.

One of the most important contributions of all of the New Voices projects is not that they replaced coverage that has been constricted, rather they added coverage that did not exist before.

New Castle NOW's coverage of a controversial high school schedule change "had much to do with its modification a year later," said managing editor Christine Yeres. But if the site had been operating before the controversy began, "we could have helped people to know the details of the largely hidden decision process of the Board of Ed ... and residents could have expressed their opposition more effectively," she said.

"People tell us," said Hartsville Today's Doug Fisher, "they come to [the site] for news they don't get in the [semi-weekly local] paper."

Did the site trigger other news coverage of community issues?

In many cases, stories that appeared on New Voices news sites generated significant "legs." Often, New Voices sites served as listening posts for mainstream media, causing other news outlets to increase their coverage in New Voices communities or elevate the topics of individual New Voices stories to metro or regional coverage (not always with attribution). More recently, New Voices sites have begun directly

sharing content with other media partners as they found themselves positioned at the forefront of the latest trend to cast off competition and embrace media collaboration.

Deerfield, N.H., for instance, was largely ignored by distant dailies but soon after The Forum launched in 2005, the Union Leader in Manchester created a zoned edition, Route 101 East, to cover the Deerfield area twice a week. The edition was frequently informed by story tips from The Forum. The Concord Monitor and Foster's Daily Democrat newspapers also ramped up coverage of nearby towns.

Madison Commons broke a significant story on brown water in one of the neighborhoods that the local paper developed into a major report on deteriorating pipes.

Green Jobs Philly stories have been picked up by Philadelphia newspapers. The Austin Bulldog has been referenced in other Austin news outlets. A recent story on the rise of Caesarian sections in Appalachia by Appalshop's Community Correspondents Corps is being re-cut for public radio, and Great Lakes Echo stories are appearing on many environmental websites.

The University of Miami's Grand Avenue News now has a formal partnership with the Miami Herald. And Cal State's 10 Valley is now regularly sharing content with the San Gabriel Valley Tribune, the Sentinel neighborhood newspaper, Youth Radio, and the USC Annenberg site, Alhambra Source.

In one of the more surprising developments, the University of Montana spun off the Dutton Country Courier to the weekly Choteau Acantha newspaper, which is partnering with the community to maintain it. Originally, Montana newspapers had objected to students creating competitive hyperlocal sites in their coverage areas.

KBUT community radio in Crested Butte, Colo., aired a 90-minute documentary and several 90-second pieces on immigration in its central Rocky Mountain community. That project is now inactive. Nevertheless, reporters from two original partners, the Gunnison Country Times and Crested Butte News, have continued providing the station with five local stories week as contract reporters.



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Did New Voices projects become the go-to places for crisis information that town officials could not provide?

When storms caused massive power outages in Chappaqua, N.Y, town officials reached out to New Castle NOW to blast information that citizens needed via the site's email list. Chappaqua is one of New Castle's hamlets.

When April 2007 floods paralyzed Deerfield and surrounding towns, only The Forum was able to get out the word on what streets were open when town systems were shut down.

"We were there when our communities needed us," said Maureen Mann, Forum founder. The town's Board of Selectmen took notice with a special commendation: *"In recognition and appreciation of a job well done ... The Forum was a perfect solution to getting information to the residents of Deerfield."*

Did the New Voices sites impart political knowledge and empower voters in new ways?

In many of the New Voices grant proposals, a common refrain was that the same people have been running town affairs for years with a high degree of entitlement and a low degree of transparency. They are re-elected because no one else runs – or even knows how to sign up.

In Chappaqua, good schools are a central focus. New Castle NOW's founders knew that not many residents paid attention to local elections. They invited the community to consider new candidates for school board. The community paid attention, and a newcomer was elected.

In New Hampshire, The Forum was initially viewed as having a Democratic bent in a largely Republican area, and early on Republican candidates resisted the site's invitations to appear at candidate forums. Now the site is the place for candidates to explain their positions and for reporters to explain what things mean. The site has excelled in explanatory, rather than conflict-driven, coverage of government.

"The Forum shines a strong light on political doings that are never reported anywhere else," said regular reader Tom St. Martin in a March 2010 survey of

readers. "I daresay Forum readers are better educated than the average readers of the state's larger newspapers regarding the workings of the state legislature and the state's Executive Council." (See *The Forum: All-Volunteer Sustainability*, page 8.)

While it is difficult to ascertain cause and effect, the site early on tracked an increase in voter turnout since its launch. It also reported a decrease in empty ballot positions. For the first time, the site was spotlighting positions that needed to be filled.

Leigh Robartes, news director of KRFP's Radio Free Moscow in Idaho, launched a regular nightly newscast with New Voices funding. It has excelled in covering issues such as the arrival of a Wal-Mart as well as local elections.

Based on MP3 downloads, "there is anecdotal evidence that many people tuned in, and our reporting on local elections has moved residents to vote and otherwise become involved," he said.

Did the site help solve community problems or elevate community issues?

Small-J journalism stories mean a lot in covering community news.

"I tell two stories," said Hartsville's Doug Fisher. "Local churches started hanging out their Sunday school banners one morning. City inspectors came around and had a sudden zeal about enforcing the sign ordinance. The outcry broke on Hartsville Today and by the end of the day the city had relented."

In another instance, the U.S. Postal Service told residents that they would have to keep crossing a particularly busy road to get to their mailboxes. After a resident wrote it up for Hartsville Today, the post office agreed to work with neighbors to move the boxes, Fisher said.

Great Lakes Echo, which spun off from Great Lakes Wiki, is focusing on environmental hot spots and the invasive Asian carp, bringing new levels of engagement



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*- Tom St. Martin
Forum reader*

Profiles in Sustainability

Great Lakes Echo: Sustaining a Niche Site

Is there such a thing as a news shed that is congruent with a watershed?

“We define our community, the Great Lakes watershed, like hydrologists or geologists,” says Dave Poulson, founder of Great Lakes Echo. It covers eight states, two provinces and two nations, including Canada, of course.

Poulson, who is also associate director of the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism, initially used New Voices funding to launch GreatLakesWiki.org. Not happy with the community engagement on that site, he spun it into Great Lakes Echo.

“Engaging readers is why your online news community exists,” he declares. Otherwise, “you might as well publish a newspaper.” So if you build it and they don’t come, what do you do? Just wait?

His advice: Poke ‘em with some sharp sticks and challenge your community to interact. Among his ideas, to date are:

- ▶ **Carp Bombs.** Use humor – invite people to photoshop images of the Asian carp, the invasive species terrorizing the lakes, into funny photos for the site’s Carp Bomb Gallery.
- ▶ **Facebook Quizzes.** Stir the puckish side of your audience with provocative questions.
 - **Which Great Lake are you?** Lake Superior? Hmm... that would be cold, inaccessible and, well, superior, Poulson says.
 - **Which Great Lakes invasive species is your former significant other?** “My ex is definitely an Asian carp. He’s huge, gross-looking, and he frequently pops up when I least expect him too. I wish there was an electric fence to keep him away from Michigan,” said one respondent.
- ▶ **Map Mashups.** Entice readers to visualize what’s happening to your area with maps. Every Monday, the site either creates or finds a map that tracks such things as factories spewing pollutants or opportunities to count frog populations.

Poulson has learned to take advantage of satellite maps that point out such things as algae blooms or sediment seepage. “You can see sediment swirling ... you can see where the mud comes from,” he marvels. “That huge regional community I’m trying to build – if you get far enough in outer space you can see that community.”

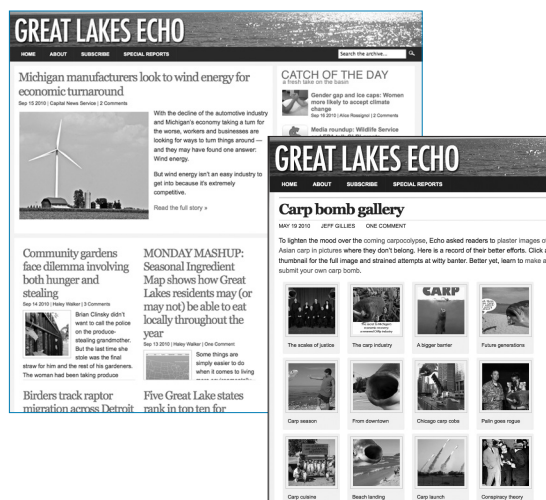
He’s been nurturing a community of “satellite nerds,” urging them to post their images. “We tell mapmakers this is a resume builder for them.”

“I would argue: Is it journalism? Is it education? I don’t really care,” he says.

The site also finds stories that no one else is doing. For instance, it looked at power plant pollution, but from its effect on the water, not from the air. When General Motors filed for bankruptcy, the site examined the contaminated sites GM left behind.

Poulson, too, is looking for future support. So far, he has received a \$10,000 grant from the Great Lakes Fisheries Trust. Initially he was hesitant to seek government funding, “but now I’m going after it.”

He sees an important opportunity to piggyback on government-funded environmental research projects that are required to have a public outreach component. “I’m saying: Build me into your grant application.” ■



to people living in the Great Lakes region. Indeed, it produced a learning module on the Knight Citizen News Network to share its strategies with others. (See *Great Lakes Echo: Sustaining a Niche Site*, opposite page.)

Loudoun Forward sought to produce major issues papers for one of the fastest-growing counties outside Washington, D.C. While the site succumbed to the founders' inability to edit the ambitious takeouts amid their other commitments, their first brief on the role of arts in the local economy gave prominence to the idea of a signature performing arts center in the county. Indeed in 2008, a year after the grant ended, the Franklin Park Arts Center opened its doors, a dream come true for local artists and patrons.

Have the New Voices sites fostered community media skills?

The New Voices sites have generously trained contributors and mentored the launch of other sites – even though they have not always directly benefited from the people they trained. However, all the projects that launched with ambitious multi-session training plans have scaled back. Instead, they are offering single-session or single-topic training to better serve prospective citizen contributors with severe time constraints.

Most of the 20 university-led New Voices projects have not only taught students how to cover local news, but also have run workshops for community members. All three of the youth media projects have provided media skills training for young people.

All of the community-radio and cable-access New Voices sites have trained citizens in blogging and audio or video production with notable successes at Radio Free Moscow, Cambridge Community Television's NeighborMedia.org, and Appalshop's Community Correspondents Corps.

Madison Commons alone trained 150 citizen journalists and posted an excellent curriculum online. Now, though, it is moving in a different direction. Oakland Local is also training people in community media skills.



The New Voices sites have generously trained contributors even though they have not always directly benefited from the people they trained.

Twin Cities Daily Planet, a project of the Twin Cities Media Alliance, revamped its training over the years and now offers citizen journalism classes and media skills workshops on discrete topics such as how to create free WordPress sites for small business and community organizations.

Importantly, community media training is showing early signs of offering a modest source of revenue for sites that can offer local nonprofits or businesses how-to skills in creating websites or using social media to advance their operations.

Several sites have fielded ongoing streams of calls from people asking how to replicate what they are doing.

Moreover, the sites have been the focus of academic research. Doug Fisher's cookbook, "Hartsville Today: The first year of a small-town citizen-journalism site," has been downloaded 3,000 times.

Did the site receive independent accolades or validation?

For two consecutive years (2008 and 2009), the Minnesota Society of Professional Journalists recognized the Twin Cities Daily Planet with its Page One Award for Best Independent News Website. (See *Twin Cities Daily Planet: Sustaining Citizen Journalists*, page 14.)

Said the judges: *"The breadth and depth of this site is terrific. It connects on multiple fronts: reader engagement, neighborhood coverage, local opinions, 24/7 updates and a strong commitment to a diversity of voices. TCDailyPlanet really taps the power of the medium to make the community part of the conversation – a lesson some of its competitors could benefit from."*

The Daily Planet has also turned the ideas of accolades around. It not only publishes the Minnesota Ethnic and Community Media Directory but also honors top ethnic and community sites with an awards program.

ChicagoTalks.org, a project of Columbia College-Chicago, has been honored for publishing award-winning student work with awards from Investigative Reporters and Editors, the Society of Professional Journalists and the Chicago Headline Club. Among its winning efforts were a two-part series on Chicago aldermen hiring

Profiles in Sustainability

Twin Cities Daily Planet: Sustaining Citizen Journalists

Of all the New Voices grantees, TC Daily Planet has raised the most money (\$760,000) and has shown the greatest resilience in adapting to community needs and building a corps of contributors.

The site aggregates news from more than 100 community partners; citizen journalists now make up about 40 percent of its content. The site is a model for recruiting, mentoring and sustaining a corps of contributors. One of the chief ways it does that is with a multiple entry points.

“We need to have multiple roads in,” said site editor Mary Turck. “There’s no single solution to recruiting citizen journalists... Recruiting, training and mentoring them is a constant challenge.”

Let’s count the ways:

- **The Assignment Desk** lists the lineup of articles the site is seeking and invites people to volunteer for the reporting. It’s how the site got a certified arborist to write a story on the emerald ash borer.

- **Email solicitations** are sent every week to Turck’s list of 100 writers, highlighting the stories she’s looking for and inviting them to one of two Writers’ Workshops she holds every week to help people report and get feedback on their stories. “This is a more personal way in,” she said.

- **Topical training workshops** provide new training opportunities. TCDP used to train prospective citizen journalists with a four-session curriculum of night classes. But it found people willing to give up one night for training, but not four. Now, it focuses single sessions on different aspects, such as how to create a WordPress site.

- **Monthly lunches with journalists** let prospective contributors hear from a professional journalist. Here they are invited to write for the Planet.

- **Planet Café** invites people to bring in stories or contribute to stories the news site is working on.

- **Forum Monitoring** offers the sharp-eyed Turck opportunities to develop news from many of the Twin Cities’ online community forums. When she comes across an interesting post, she’ll reach out and invite the author to redo or expand on the piece for TCDP.

- **Free Speech Zone** is where TCDP publishes opinions, rants and non-reported articles. “This offers a place for people who don’t want to be reporters,” Turck said.

- **Bloggers** have a reserved spot on the site. If a blogger writes a really good post, it may end up being one of the five featured blogs on the site.

- **Writer pages** give TCDP writers personal pages that can house their portfolio with options to enter their own bios, write their own blogs, and list all the stories they have written.

- **Small rewards** work, too. Handing out reporter notebooks, TCDP business cards or press credentials to cover particular news events carry a lot of weight.

The site pays small amounts for some assigned articles and is very transparent about its payment policies with guidelines posted on the site.

Its latest plans are to recruit correspondents for the nearly 100 neighborhoods in Minneapolis. Founder Jeremy Iggers envisions new ways to connect and share information, including member profiles, maps of attractions and businesses and readers comments. ■



“There’s no single solution to recruiting citizen journalists... Recruiting, training and mentoring them is a constant challenge.”

- Mary Turck, Editor

relatives to work city jobs; an investigation on the City Council breaking state laws by failing to keep adequate records and voting on ordinances without enough members present; an 11-story series on abuses in the Illinois General Assembly scholarship program; and a series on handicapped accessibility problems in the Chicago Transit Authority.

Also of note, the college recently won a \$45,000 grant from the Chicago Community Foundation to launch a sibling site, AustinTalks.org, for a diverse and little-covered community of 100,000. The grant was part of Knight's Community Information Challenge.

The Society for Professional Journalists recognized GreatLakesWiki.org in 2008 as one of the top three online, in-depth, news sites reported by university students.

GreaterFultonNews.org was named one of the 40 most successful university-community partnerships as part of Virginia Commonwealth University's 40th anniversary in 2008.

Does a site need to make money to be sustainable?

With everyone in search of new revenue models for journalism, there is an assumption that sites must bring in money to be sustainable. Again and again, we've seen volunteer New Voices efforts that are sustaining themselves with little income. And we do believe that community news, as a new form of civic volunteerism, is one important model.

The Forum's Maureen Mann has even remarked rhetorically: "I don't know what we would do if we made money. Who would we decide to pay?"

There is no question that volunteer sites run the risk of disrupting their organizational dynamic when money is introduced. That said, nearly all the sites would like to be able to pay their contributors at least something for their work. Many already are.

GrossePointeToday.com in Michigan is paying \$150 for an assigned, bylined article and hopes to reimburse Wayne State students for fuel costs.

TC Daily Planet pays from \$10 to \$100 for a story specifically assigned by the editor. And it is now trying out Spot.Us to crowdfund some reporting, seeking, for instance, to raise \$2,000 for a story on whether low-income high rises are urban ghettos or urban villages.

There is no question that volunteer sites run the risk of disrupting their organizational dynamic when money is introduced. That said, nearly all the sites would like to be able to pay their contributors at least something for their work. Many already are.

Oakland Local is paying \$200 to \$250 for some stories. Several of the university sites, including 10 Valley, Intersections: South Los Angeles and Grand Avenue News, are paying student editors and reporters during summer and winter breaks to operate the sites year round.

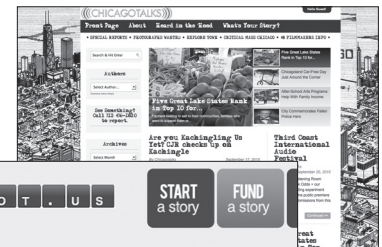
In a March 2010 survey, more than three-quarters of the New Voices respondents said they had brought in other money from ads, events or other grants.

All but a handful of the New Voices sites feel pressure to raise money, but most are juggling multiple commitments and are short on fund-raising skills. ■



"TCDailyPlanet really taps the power of the medium to make the community part of the conversation – a lesson some of its competitors could benefit from."

- Minnesota Society of Professional Journalists



Profiles in Sustainability

Oakland Local: Sustaining Momentum

Oakland Local is a case study in a New Era for Community News Sites – namely how future sites will use social media to ramp up, spark buzz, and build an instant brand.

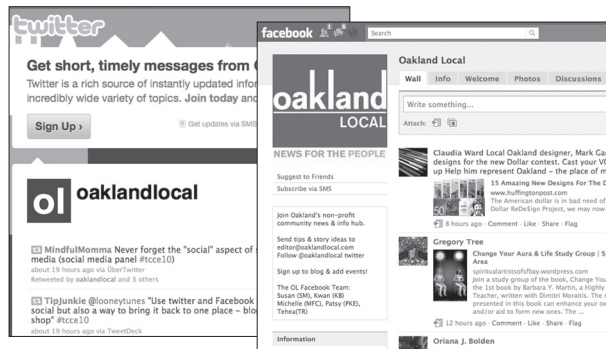
Key to its going live in October 2009 was an orchestrated time line of outreach. At 3 a.m. the day before launch, founder Susan Mernit and her partners wrote emails to 800 people, urging them to look at the site and tweet or blog about it the next day.

That compressed timeline, she said, was essential: It resulted in more than 1,800 visitors on launch day, and the Twitter activity prompted stories in three trade publications.

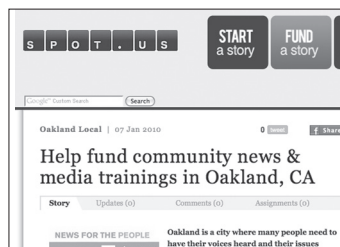
On Facebook, the site began attracting 100 new members a day. As of September 2010, it had 4,150 Facebook fans and more than 2,450 Twitter followers and 309,500 unique visitors. “Facebook is a profound referral source for us and a huge brand builder,” Mernit said. “In terms of momentum I think Twitter is fantastic, but Facebook has become a dominant tool.”

Mernit said a lot of the initial effort involved coaxing. “Every single person who registered on the site got a personal note,” she said. “I was really trying to coax a little fire into a flame before it went out.”

The site has partnered with 35 community organizations and worked hard to see that their content was included. It also partners with Bay Area media outlets.



“Facebook is a profound referral source for us and a huge brand builder.”
– Susan Mernit



Mernit set aside \$3,000 of her original New Voices grant to build the site and reserved the rest for writers. She and two co-founders work for free, for now, drawing their livelihoods from consulting and other work.

Mernit knew she couldn't pay her writers \$400 or \$600 for a story, but she could pay \$200 or \$250 for some. And she raised more by pitching stories on the crowdfunding site Spot.Us to cover an important trial in Los Angeles. Other news outlets picked up the site's coverage.

But she doesn't aspire to be an all-volunteer site. “I was very aggressive about fundraising. I knew we couldn't wait till the money ran out before we raised money,” she said. She enlisted friends to research grant possibilities at the FoundationCenter.org's site.

“We got turned down a lot,” she said. However, as of June 2010, nine months after launch, she had raised \$102,500 from four grants, including funding to help the site be viewed not just on smart phones, but basic cell phones as well.

In addition, Oakland Local is going out of its way to provide training to build media skills in the overall community – not just training citizen journalists to write for the site.

For Oakland Local, key issues are food access, the environment, social justice and development. Mernit said it's important to tell funders what your issues are and “not that I just need money to keep going.” ■

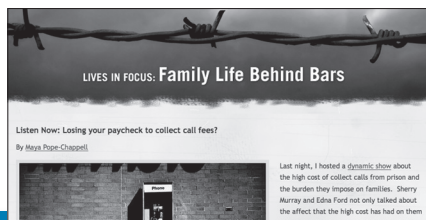
Key Findings

Engagement is key.

Robust and frequent content begets more content, but all is for naught if the community doesn't pay attention. Sites not only need to whet the interest of potential contributors, they also have to get the community at large to participate.

The sites that have invited community participation in multiple ways show the most promise. Engagement doesn't always have to come in the form of full-blown stories, although original content delivers the greatest added value. Community involvement can take the form of photos, videos or links to other stories in the state or region. It can be community announcements or current meeting agendas. It can be an historical photo or article from the public library. Or it can take the form of comments.

Engagement can also be entirely creative. Family Life Behind Bars has moved away from having CUNY students go out and report stories and instead sought to become more collaborative with its community – people who have family members in prison.



Engagement doesn't always have to come in the form of full-blown stories.

“My [story] ideas are not as rich as work that comes out of collaborative work,” said founder Sandeep Junnarkar. So he has sought engagement by inviting art competitions and enabling people to leave questions via voicemail. The audio then appears on the website. One woman asked for advice on how to deal with a family member dying of cancer in prison, which led to a column

of tips. The site also runs Internet radio shows. Sometimes he throws up a Google form and asks his community to weigh in. With prison telephone calls costing as much as \$3 for a connection fee and 60 cents a minute, he put up a survey asking: “What did you sacrifice to accept these collect calls?”

“We got a great response,” he said.

The Forum has addressed the community's rich artistic culture by publishing creative writing.

New Era News has invited politicians to be guest bloggers.

The Twin Cities Daily Planet allows rants in its Free Speech Zone for community members who don't want to report journalistic stories.

Grosse Pointe Today updates a Google map weekly with police blotter news.

The Austin Bulldog posts copies of public documents it acquires in reporting its investigative stories for readers to examine themselves.

Great Lakes Echo looks to engage its community with satellite images that track things like sediment runoff or algae blooms in the lakes.

Vet Venue has helped 150 veterans find jobs but learned that vets didn't want to share any information that might make them seem unemployable, so the site has focused on job resources.

Despite often-voiced concerns about whether contributions from citizen journalists could be accurate and ethical, the New Voices projects did not have difficulties reporting responsible stories. In only one instance did J-Lab intervene with content concerns.

If anything, New Voices projects introduced some storytelling techniques that mainstream journalists would do well to heed: There was, for instance, a willingness to report not just what people said in a meeting, but also clarify what they meant to say. And more explanatory, instead of conflict-framed, coverage of issues has won appreciation from readers.

If anything, New Voices projects introduced some storytelling techniques that mainstream journalists would do well to heed.

Citizen journalism is a high-churn, high-touch enterprise.

Citizen journalism math is working out this way: Fewer than one in 10 of those you train will stick around to be regular contributors. And even then, they may be “regular” for only a short period of time.

Very few of the 150 citizen journalists that Madison Commons trained are still writing for the site. “Although the workshops filled, we’ve found it challenging to retain writers once they complete the training,” said site founder Lew Friedland. “This has been a flaw in our original design: We believed that it would be most difficult to recruit people, but that once they attended the workshops, they would continue writing for the Commons.”

To adapt, the Commons reached out to more neighborhood associations to include newsletter stories, and it sought to cultivate writers who wanted to focus on particular citywide issues, such as transportation or housing.

Still, that was not good enough. Now, five years later, the site has just finished a redesign and is re-launching with a significant shift from its original citizen-driven model. It is moving to more of a university/nonprofit model with media and community partnerships and a focus on transportation, education and local food, Friedland said. Five students will serve as area editors, doing a combination of reporting, editing and recruiting community journalists and bloggers.

“Relying on training citizen journalists and then getting content from them has not been an effective model... Instead, the methods that work begin with the citizen journalists where they are and where their passions lie.”

*- Mary Turck
TC Daily Planet*

Likewise, of the 12 citizen journalists in the first class of Appalshop’s Community Correspondent Corps, only three have stuck around to report. CCC, under new leadership, will soon resume training. The Austin Bulldog has invited prospective writers to meet-ups and some are now contributing to the site.

Chicago Talks “really pulled back from” training citizen journalists, said co-founder Barbara Iverson. Content now mostly comes from students and partnerships with LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corp.) groups to tell untold stories.

Citizen journalism math is working out this way: Fewer than one in 10 of those you train will stick around to be regular contributors. Even then, they may be “regular” for only a short period of time.

Lexington Commons found very few people willing to come to training sessions and its planned monthly workshops ended.

Twin Cities Daily Planet has done a notable job of recruiting, refreshing and mentoring its stable of writers. Still, said editor Mary Turck, “Relying on training citizen journalists and then getting content from them has not been an effective model.” (See *Twin Cities Daily Planet: Sustaining Citizen Journalists*, page 14.)

“Instead, the methods that work begin with the citizen journalists where they are and where their passions lie,” she said. “If someone wants to write, that’s great – we try to start them with articles that they can handle and offer them all the training that they are willing to absorb. That means different things for different people.”

For instance, if a person wants to write about her neighborhood, she starts out by writing promotional articles. TC Daily Planet then guides her to finding multiple sources and to understanding the difference between reporting and promoting, between journalism and press releases, Turck said.

It helps to engage a site’s most vocal and prolific commenters. It’s good to seek out partnerships with neighborhood activists, power posters, issues experts, and prep sports participants. New Castle NOW’s Susie Pender said she cajoles parents to file reports of youth athletic games with a simple reassurance: “I will not make you look like you are bragging about your kid.”

We've concluded that it's best to start with content from a core of writers – usually the founders, community volunteers or students – who can spearhead reliable, fresh content. Once up and running, sites should work to tease out, rather than train in advance, a corps of contributors.

It's no coincidence that some of the most robust projects originated from founders who are intimately versed in their communities and operate their sites as a labor of love.

Sweat equity counts for a lot.

Bottom-up sites really work. Knowledge of the community counts for a lot, and it's no coincidence that some of the most robust projects originated from founders who are intimately versed in their communities and operate their sites as a labor of love. Most get little to no compensation for the untold hours of work they put into their sites. Others run their sites on top of paid jobs elsewhere.

Jeremy Iggers was a long-time civic journalist convening community members while at the Minneapolis Star Tribune before he quit to launch TC Daily Planet. But after five years at the site, both he and top editor Mary Turck are only “part-time” workers.

New Castle NOW founders were at-home moms and long-time school activists and community catalysts when they directed their volunteer energies at launching a news site for their community.

Profiles in Sustainability

Greater Fulton News: Community Sustainability

GreaterFultonNews.org was birthed in 2007 by professors at Virginia Commonwealth University in partnership with Fulton's Neighborhood Resource Center (NRC). Now, it has been entirely handed off to the community, and it's a model for having the community sustain a site.

The news blog focuses on micro-local activities and events for the heavily African-American neighborhoods of Fulton, Fulton Hill, and Montrose Heights in Richmond, Va., and on larger events with direct impact on the community.

The volunteer effort has no staff reporters and one web maestro who rewards those who post content or comments with things like pizza coupons or movie tickets. VCU students provide some content for the site and it still operates under the auspices of the NRC.

Those incentives are funded by advertising on the site, which is now part of the Richmond Ad Network.

The site has “kind of taken off,” said Jeff South, the VCU professor who helped to launch it. “I've pretty much passed it on,” he said. “I sit on the Advisory Board and am willing to do training. But I point people to resources on J-Learning.org.”

He said the site has about 140 contributors. About 75 percent of the posts are stories that people have written, bulletin board postings or news about neighborhood association meetings. Another quarter might be excerpts from the local daily. Anyone can post and the site defines news very broadly.

“Content is king. You've got to get good content,” he said. “Not good in the sense of AP style, but good in the sense of what interests people.”

For instance, South said, the site originally planned to downplay crime because the local TV stations over reported it. But they discovered the community wanted crime coverage, just a different kind – more focused on how to be safe or protect your home or property. So, for instance, if there

was a burglary in the neighborhood, the site might advise you to let your neighbors know if you plan to be away, he said.

The site also pays a tribute to a new kind of civic catalyst, one who clones a matrix of community blogs. The site's programming and format is based on work by John Murden, who operates the award-winning Church Hill People's News, which has been honored again and again as Richmond's best community blog. He has since fathered several other local blog sites. ■



Rural News Network co-founder Courtney Lowery knew Dutton, Mont., site of the Dutton Country Courier, because she grew up there. She worked on the site in addition to editing the regional NewWest.net and teaching at the University of Montana.

Grosse Pointe Today was aided by a \$20,000 investment from founder Ben Burns, former executive editor of the Detroit News, and colleagues who have left daily journalism. Burns also works as a professor at Wayne State University.

Personal sacrifice in the early going is common. Oakland Local's co-founders are opting to pay writers first before paying themselves, despite having raised \$102,500 in the first 10 months of operations.

Some sites are facing competition from commercial operations, such as AOL's Patch.com, which offers a templated website, pays a salaried editor, and networks local and national advertising.

Top-down projects had a more challenging time making connections. Maryanne Reed tried to launch news programming for a community radio station in Monroe County, hours away from West Virginia University. It produced 140 newscasts, but is now inactive. Her advice: "Learn about the community and listen ... We learned these lessons the hard way, coming into Monroe County as outsiders with a distinct vision of what we wanted to accomplish and facing initial resistance to our plans and timetable."

Donica Mensing, who launched Nuestro Tahoe in a heavily Hispanic community 50 miles away from the University of Nevada-Reno, identified as a significant barrier the "lack of genuine roots within the groups in the community."

Community news sites are not a business yet.

There is a mismatch between instilling sustainable civic demand for local news information and developing sustainable economic models.

While most of the New Voices sites are exploring hybrid models of support, none is raising enough money to pay

full salaries and benefits. Instead, they are eking out income via such sources as memberships, donations, sponsorships, advertising, coupon deals, events, fee-based training, crowd-funded stories, consulting and grants.

They are eking out income via such sources as memberships, donations, sponsorships, advertising, coupon deals, events, fee-based training, crowd-funded stories, consulting and grants.

No one in this space yet seems to be receiving money for licensing their content, as a few larger nonprofits have done.

Two have launched with partners that had an advertising infrastructure. However, Hartsville Today was "never really integrated into the operations" of its partner, the semi-weekly Messenger, or the newspaper's ad sales staff, Fisher said.

Grosse Pointe Today launched with a plan to have the 45-year-old Blue Book directory sell ads on its behalf, but revenues were disappointing and the relationship has ended. Nevertheless, said founder Burns, "We got into this for the long haul."

A handful of sites have been awarded their own nonprofit status, including Grosse Pointe Today, The Austin Bulldog, and The Forum. While this makes it easier to get grants, it also means they must ensure in the future that a third of their income comes from public sources, as required by the IRS.

Many of the sites would benefit from putting a greater emphasis on search engine optimization. Simple steps, like specifically identifying their geographic reach in their site structure (headers, sections, footers) or within individual stories, could help readers and advertisers find them more easily and clarify the site's mission for prospective supporters.

Now, some sites are facing competition from commercial operations, such as AOL's Patch.com, which offers a templated website, pays a salaried editor, and networks regional and national advertising.

Whether these top-down, cookie-cutter enterprises can connect well with hundreds of communities remains to be seen. We suspect that much will depend on the site editors' attachments to their communities. At best, they will provide more needed community information. At worst, they will siphon off display advertising much like craigslist siphoned off classifieds from newspapers.

Social media is game changing.

The use of such social media networking tools as Facebook and Twitter surfaced late in our cycle of New Voices grantees. Results, however, were dramatic for those sites that used their founders' and contributors' social networks to push out content, generate buzz, and recruit new readers.

All signs point to social media as ushering in a New Age for Community News, building phenomenal capacity for recruiting readers and writers, for marketing the projects, and developing partnership and funding opportunities. In some cases, it has become their primary form of distribution.

All signs point to social media as ushering in a New Age for Community News.

NewEraNews, the political and cultural blog by young Coloradans, launched in April 2010 and quickly recruited more than 25 contributors, including interest groups, state legislators and members of Congress. They produced 200 stories in just the first two months with many picked up by national blog sites.

Oakland Local's strategic use of social media instantly put the site on the national map and its content is now being indexed by Yahoo! and Google News. (See *Oakland Local: Sustaining Momentum*, page 16.)

Meanwhile, older New Voices sites are ramping up their use of social media, incorporating tools into their existing sites, and in some cases developing new sites to take more advantage of them.

Technology can be a blessing and a curse.

Community news sites would not exist without the tech tools for easily building websites and creating digital content. However, again and again, New Voices projects that aspired to build custom websites were tripped up by design and development delays.

Bay Voices's Ethnic News Service, Mi-Whi News, New Era News, the North Lawndale Community Weblog, Policy Options and others experienced lengthy delays as outside web developers placed them low on their list of client priorities or university IT people had insufficient time to help them. In some cases universities didn't want to give site contributors full access to post content on the sites they built.

Great Lakes Echo moved from a wiki to WordPress. "It's not as pretty as we'd like," said Dave Poulson. "But it works and we're publishing content when we might still be waiting if we went with Drupal."

Bill Finnegan, founder of Vermont Climate Witness, wishes he would have gone open-source instead of spending money on a customized site. He ended up locked into the vendor for updates, which "challenged us to achieve our mission."

Ben Burns commissioned a custom Drupal site for Grosse Pointe Today. "We fell far enough behind schedule that we had to hire a young assistant to do some of the work ... so design became our single largest expense."

"I would recommend that other startups seriously consider using WordPress" to start, he said – advice that was echoed by others.

Legacy news outlets are not yet in the game.

Only in the last couple of years are models for more formalized collaborations between daily news outlets and a network of hyperlocal sites in a particular community being launched and tested. J-Lab has been in the vanguard of experimenting with some of these models in its Networked Journalism project.

As legacy newsrooms alter their competitive mindsets to embrace collaborations with other media makers in their communities, independent hyperlocal news sites will begin to benefit. But it was too early for most of the New Voices grantees to take advantage of that.

Both 10 Valley and Mi-Whi News launched after finding themselves unable to move forward on initial plans to partner with existing news outlets. In some cases their newsroom contacts' jobs had changed; in other cases the editors were too overburdened even to return phone calls. 10 Valley is now sharing content with others and Mi-Whi will firm up partnerships as it develops content.



As legacy newsrooms embrace collaboration, hyperlocal news sites will begin to benefit.

Profiles in Sustainability

New Castle NOW: Civic Catalysts as Drivers of Sustainability

NewCastleNOW.org emails news to 3,000 subscribers twice a week, on Fridays and again Mondays with weekend updates. Its website has attracted 60,000 unique visitors in the 10 months leading up to its third birthday in October 2010.

Its two high-energy co-founders, Susie Pender and Christine Yeres, write most of the site's articles. As long-time activists they are steeped in community knowledge, acting as the sort of civic bumblebees that cross-pollinate a lot of community groups. As such, they typify one category of people who are launching and making a go of hyperlocal community news sites.

On average, they publish about 20 articles a week and more, 25, during the school year. About 120 others have contributed at times. Its archives held 3,450 articles as of this report.

New Castle NOW is one of the few New Voices sites that have hired a commissioned ad salesperson. To date, it's brought in \$90,000 in ad revenue from 73 advertisers. "We make money, but we don't care about that though," said editor Pender.

The site soon hopes to receive its 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. Then it will also need to begin raising money from its readers and Pender and Yeres plan to apply for grants as well.

The site's central purpose is to report on the town's two main governing boards, the town board and the school board, each with five elected officials.

"We've built good working relationships with board members, although they remain the right amount of uncomfortable with us," managing editor Yeres said. "It's been interesting to watch them get used to us. It was really impossible, once we were up and running, to avoid dealing with us."

Simmering have been two controversial issues: a high school schedule change prepared without public participation and a proposal to build a large residential development on the former Reader's Digest property in town, which is opposed by many residents.

NCNOW's coverage of the developer's proposal "has decidedly evened the playing field," Yeres said. The site on Aug. 13, 2010, covered a meeting between the two boards to discuss the proposal. It was billed as "a low-level conversation" between the two boards and it was assigned to a room too small to accommodate the 100 community members who wanted to attend.

NCNOW, knowing there was "huge interest," brought a video camera, filmed the entire meeting and posted it on YouTube – "a first for us," Yeres crowed.

Since then, readers, clearly moved by NCNOW's coverage, weighed in both with thanks and 324 comments.

For its first two years, the site resisted an anonymous comments section after articles. It only allowed signed letters to the editor because the editors feared the sorts of nasty remarks that once populated a town comment board.

But after meeting and hearing the experiences of other New Voices grantees, they decided to give it a try. "So we raced home and set ourselves up for commentary," Yeres said. "The comment section has been a huge success!" ■



The University of Miami's Grand Avenue News, however, recently entered a deal to share links and content with the Miami Herald, which is part of J-Lab's Networked Journalism initiative. "I have no doubt that this relationship between hyperlocal news sites and larger metropolitan news sites will have its place in the future," founder Kim Grinfeder said. It helps that student reporters like the idea of getting published in The Herald.

Temple's Philadelphia Neighborhoods site is now a genuine neighborhood newswire, and its content has triggered partnerships with *Al Día* and WHYY public radio.

Meanwhile, Madison Commons is entering into a partnership with the website of a local television station, WISC/Channel 3000, to create a new hyperlocal effort that will seek foundation support.



The academic calendar is not good enough.

The best university models are those in which community coverage is integrated into the journalism curriculum.

Many of the New Voices sites are university affiliated and show great promise for covering community news, but these efforts can also be steeped in great peril. They must run year-round if they are going to maintain momentum and credibility as a reliable news source.

The best university models are those in which community coverage is integrated into the journalism curriculum so that students are learning how to do journalism in the community, and the university is developing listening posts. Temple University, for instance, requires its students to work in its Multimedia Urban Reporting Lab (MURL), which produces Philadelphia Neighborhoods. Columbia College Chicago students provide rich content to Chicago Talks.

Other USC-Annenberg faculty members have approached Willa Seidenberg to offer student content for her Intersections: South L.A. site. For one class covering the Inglewood community, she promised to post every publishable story. Not only was every student published, the teacher also said it was "the best class she ever taught."

"Students liked being published on a real working site, receiving comments, meeting people who had read their work," she said. "As a reporting lab, these students got the very best experience in journalism. And, in return, the community got a lot of coverage it would not ordinarily receive."

Grand Avenue News' Grinfeder, however, found so many University of Miami journalism students interviewing the same people in Coconut Grove that he assigned students to specific areas to avoid overlap.

Other university projects have paid student interns, hired grad students as editors, or parachuted journalism students into the community as trainers.

And one project, PolicyOptions.org, involved university experts working with students to create white papers on public issues. Twenty campuses have researched 150 issues papers, which are starting to be posted online.

Early in the program, J-Lab required, as a condition of receiving a New Voices grant, that a university commit to operating its news site year round. We learned that it was impossible to maintain the momentum of a startup community news site if it went dark over Christmas, spring break and the summer.

We strongly recommend, however, that university projects figure out in advance what hurdles they will have to leap before launching a community news site. Several of the New Voices projects have been seriously hamstrung by university requirements that deprived them of the nimbleness they needed.

Some were caught in university competitive bidding requirements that delayed hiring or prevented them from using web developers and vendors from their target community. Some were blocked from using grant money to pay community contributors. Others found that if they used New Voices funds to pay student writers, the university deducted those payments from the students' scholarship awards. One project was prevented from locating grant-funded equipment in micro bureaus in their targeted community. Universities also have resisted putting "Donation" buttons on the New Voices websites. And several projects experienced considerable delays from incompatibility and poor service issues with university tech departments.

Still, there are growing opportunities. USC's Marshall School of Business consulting program, for example, has accepted Intersections: South L.A. as a client to develop a marketing plan.

And Kent State's aviation storytelling site, Stories That Fly, has far-reaching research plans if it nails the \$10,000

it needs to match a \$40,000 pledge to acquire a Piper Club as part of its equipment needs. If it is successful, said founder Joe Murray, two biologist colleagues have expressed interest in working with STF on a currently funded water conservation project and other environmental research projects are in the offing.

We also learned that distance is fatal. Some schools sought to ramp up news sites for communities that were hours away from campus. West Virginia University and the Universities of Montana and Nevada-Reno launched projects that involved lengthy round trip travel that could not be sustained after the grant. Of U-Montana's two sites, the Dutton Country Courier has been handed off to a local newspaper; the stunning CrowNews.net has had no takers yet. West Virginia's community radio project and Reno's Nuestro Tahoe lapsed after their grants.

To realize the full potential for connecting with their communities via news sites, universities need to create entrepreneurial centers for community outreach and engagement that can circumnavigate disabling red tape.

Youth media should be supplemental.

Projects that tried to train middle or high schools students to report on news in their community produced infrequent content, in large part because they fell prey a lot of turnover in trainers and the need for great supervision.

We could see no sustainability model amid the turnover of students and the emphasis on developing content in the summers or after school hours.

Of the three youth media sites that were funded, two are inactive, Anansi's Web in Gary, Ind. and HipHopSpeaks.org in Philadelphia. The latter is now trying to revive its site. Both struggled to retain the trainers needed to help the kids and frequency of content was spotty. HipHopSpeak's core development team disappeared and some "lost interest with the quality and quantity of submissions we received," said founder Donyale Hooper-Reavis.

The "Girls on Air" podcasting initiative at the Lower Eastside Girls Club went dark for almost a year amid staffing issues and then was reborn in a new building and with a new commitment to post twice a month.

However, all remain deeply committed to training young people. "I can truthfully say this grant has helped define the path we are traveling into the future. It has encouraged us to look deeply at what communications

and digital literacy programs have to offer teens," said Girls Club founder Lyn Pentecost.

As the New Voices funding evolved, J-Lab changed eligibility guidelines to discourage projects that were primarily focused on training youth rather than covering community news. We could see no sustainability model amid the turnover of students and the emphasis on developing content in the summers or after school hours. Still, we were overwhelmed with youth training proposals.

That said, some of the projects, in particular Intersections: South L.A., are finding some success in partnering with local schools, and their efforts helps plug the site into community issues.

We recommend that focusing on high school or middle school students to contribute content for a community news site be a second- or third-tier source of content – one that can be developed after launch and the site has a reliable stream of other stories.

Community radio needs help.

Eleven New Voices grants were awarded to community radio and cable access television stations. Simply put, only three remain active. The others succumbed to high turnover in project leaders, and on-air demands that focused on programming with limited resources for web production.

New Voices applications for funding revealed that many community radio stations want to develop community newscasts, often with a corps of volunteer journalists.

To provide robust community news, community radio and cable access stations need more support for expensive equipment and funding for stable leadership and web production if their news initiatives are to endure.

Appalshop's Community Correspondents Corps, stalled after training 12 correspondents and was recently revived under the leadership of newly hired AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer. Still, equipment is badly needed to train new storytellers.

Two other New Voices community radio projects, however, are notable successes. Radio Free Moscow's nightly newscast

Of the 46 New Voices grants in this study, eight were originally awarded to community radio stations. Two were rescinded for failure to perform. Three others are no longer active. A sixth,

has supplied important news and information for five years to Moscow, Idaho, and is often live when larger stations are on automation. Its success has much to do with the consistent and passionate stewardship of news director Leigh Robartes.

Reclaim the Media's ListenUp! Northwest project has created a content-sharing network for stories produced by more than 14 stations throughout the Pacific Northwest. The project has amplified reporting of regional issues and enriched programming for resource-strapped stations. "We are the best caretakers of our stories and Listen Up! Northwest is tracking to be an effective container for these stories," said project leader Jonathan Lawson.

New Voices also had mixed experiences with cable-access community news projects. Three New Voices grants were awarded to cable-access television stations; two are no

longer active. AccessSF's "The Street" went dark after the San Francisco Board of Supervisors pulled the plug on the entire station. The St. Paul News Desk, a project of the St. Paul Neighborhood Network, produced two half-hour shows then lost the project coordinator. The project never resumed.

The successful exception is Cambridge Community Television's Neighbor Media, which has 10 citizen journalists covering issues in Cambridge, Mass., including three who have been involved since 2007. The correspondents have produced 536 stories and blog posts to date.

To provide robust community news, community radio and cable access stations need more support for expensive equipment and funding for stable leadership and web production if their news initiatives are to endure. ■

More Numbers

Six New Voices projects are not online. One, a 2009 Towson University mapping project is expected to launch soon; its original partner went belly up and it had to find another. Route 7 Report became a monthly newsletter because of its area's limited web access, then died when no one stepped up to take it over from the Ohio University professor who helped launch it. The North Lawndale blog was plagued by technology problems from the start and failed to catch fire in the community. And three others were community radio or cable-access projects that now have no online presence.

Eleven projects are still online but have stalled for various reasons. Some failed to attract stable leadership; some were overambitious. Partners for one New York City project preferred to produce media events rather than generate media content. Some were community radio or youth media projects. Two were difficult-to-use wiki projects. Still active, however, is the high school dropout calculator in the wiki-based Learning to Finish project.

Several consider their projects to be a success, even though they are no longer active.

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"I am truly embarrassed that this project did not take root in the way that we had planned," said Maryanne Reed. Her West Virginia University project produced newscasts at a Monroe County community radio station. It stalled from inadequate staffing and commitment.

But it "was a success on a number of levels," she said. A station that had been playing automated music "suddenly was getting news releases and showed that it could be a source of news ... The project's main influence has been to help establish WHFI as a regular source of news and information about the local community."

Likewise, Donica Mensing of Nuestro Tahoe said: "We believe the time we are taking to get to know this community and its perspectives will make future journalistic efforts more successful." ■



J-Lab Observations

We are extremely proud of what these five classes of New Voices grantees have accomplished. And we are even prouder to have watched them adapt to their realities in ways that demonstrate the sustainability of their aspirations.

Kudos to the three sites that stalled and then revived:

BayVoices's Ethnic News Service, Girls on Air podcasts and Appalshop's Community Correspondents Corps. It shows that they believe there is an audience for their work.

Hats off to Greater Fulton News and the Dutton Country Courier for generating enough respect that their universities could hand off the sites to others in the community. A pat on the back for the spin-off of Great Lakes Wiki into the more robust Great Lakes Echo. Cheers for Madison Commons' re-birth as a site not so reliant on citizen journalists.

And a big applause for all the sites that doggedly figured out – and are still figuring out – how to do what they want to do. There is still much work to be done.

In some instances, J-Lab intervened in hands-on ways. We liberated projects to move forward where they could. We urged more realistic content plans when

sites were stalled. We offered editing suggestions for complex issues papers. We brokered a new marriage, finding a new publishing platform when the original partner shut down.

In March 2010, J-Lab surveyed the New Voices grantees to elicit additional feedback on their projects. Twenty-nine of the 46 projects responded. More than three-quarters of the respondents said they considered their projects to be both successful and sustainable. And a large majority said they had brought in other revenue through advertising, events or other grants.

New Voices Survey Results

Consider their site successful	86%
Consider their site sustainable	86%
Received revenue from events	83%
Sold ads	79%
Received other grants	93%

A big applause for all the sites that doggedly figured out — and are still figuring out — how to do what they want to do.



Changing the Rules

As these sites have adapted, so has J-Lab changed some of the rules of the road. We adjusted the baseline requirements in our annual Request for Proposals so that we:

- ▶ Required all projects, whether print or broadcast or cable, to have a web presence so stories could be seen by others who wanted to learn from them.
- ▶ Required university projects to commit to year-round content development instead of just producing stories during the academic semesters.
- ▶ Discouraged projects that focused on youth media training instead of producing community news.
- ▶ Pressed for a two-year grant commitment, seeking grantees who wanted to go for the second-year matching funds.
- ▶ Sought assurances that project leaders would be around for the full two years of the grant.
- ▶ Probed for whether projects leaders had, or could access, the tech skills they would need.
- ▶ Redrafted university sub-grant agreements to accommodate various university requests.

Perhaps more important, we came to learn that we were not just mentoring community news projects. We were also mentoring fledgling nonprofit news sites. Many of the grantees had little experience in applying for or managing grants. The idea of delivering progress reports, collecting metrics for their projects and tracking impact was a steep learning curve for some.

As important, the projects learned from one another. “While we are deeply grateful for the Knight Foundation funding, it has been the work of the other winners that has really spurred us into action,” said 10 Valley founder Jon Beaupre.

New Voices was deliberately designed only to provide micro-funding that could be leveraged to secure more support. In no case did the grantees resent the level of funding. But, operating with skeleton resources, they found they needed the two-year grant cycle just to focus on building their sites, getting fresh content, and building their corps of contributors. Figuring out future support is next on many agendas.

“When you fly a plane with little fuel, it really focuses you on your destination,” said Joe Murray, Stories That Fly founder. “So, congratulations to Knight for not giving us enough money.” (Continued on page 29)

We came to learn that we were not just mentoring community news projects. We were also mentoring fledgling nonprofit news sites.



While the majority of the New Voices grantees judged their efforts to be both successful and sustainable, we pose an overarching question:

What if it's more important for a community's demand for news and information to be whetted and sustained by a community news venture rather than for a particular community news site to operate continuously?

It is too early to tell, but we would expect that if a robust New Voices site falters in the future, the community would see to it that another takes its place.

J-Lab Recommendations

We emerge from this stage of our grant experiences with some recommendations – both for startup community news sites and those who wish to support them.

For those who seek to launch their own community news sites, be they professional or amateur journalists, we urge you to:

- ▶ Start simply with free or open-source software.
- ▶ Be sure project leaders stay involved; delegating key tasks to grad assistants or volunteers doesn't work.
- ▶ Build in a community editor or partnership coordinator on the front end to engage in the high-touch work of teasing out content contributors.
- ▶ Hook interest from entities with established infrastructures – agricultural extension agencies, public libraries, community technology centers.
- ▶ Try everything. Keep what works and redo what doesn't. Be willing to do so quickly.
- ▶ Remember that the community doesn't only want news; it wants connections as well.
- ▶ Think of your task as not just covering community, but *building* it as well.

For those in a position to support new developments in the community news ecosystem, consider interventions that:

- ▶ Build up social media skills for community news sites.
- ▶ Convene existing site operators with wannabe site founders.
- ▶ Provide training in grant writing and management.
- ▶ Establish a New Ideas Fund for ideas that surface after the project really understands what it needs.
- ▶ Build a second-tier Tech Fund for sites ready for more complex web development.
- ▶ Ramp up donor education so that interested high-wealth individuals understand opportunities for supporting new media infrastructures.
- ▶ Develop ad software that can help small sites monetize their value to their communities.

Conclusion

Moving forward, the landscape keeps changing in exciting, but challenging, ways. Commercial competition is moving full bore onto the community news scene. Professional journalists, gone from their newsrooms, are ferreting out new ways to practice journalism in the community news space. Social media is ramping up the speed of site launches. And, new technologies continue to introduce new opportunities and efficiencies.

What is not changing is the acute demand for news coverage – and for connections – in communities large

We have seen how the opportunities for empowering citizens to be citizens are activated when they have the news and information they need to do their jobs as citizens. Matching that civic demand with civic sustainability continues to be the challenge for the future.

and small, from metro suburbs to college towns to rural areas. We have seen how the opportunities for empowering citizens to be citizens are activated when they have the news and information they need to do their jobs as citizens.

Matching that civic demand with civic sustainability continues to be the challenge for the future. ■

Roster of New Voice Grantees 2005-2009

Year	Project	Website	Location	Active
2005	The Forum	www.forumhome.org	Deerfield, NH	Yes
2005	Radio Free Moscow	news.radiofreemoscow.org	Moscow, ID	Yes
2005	Hartsville Today	www.hvtd.com	Hartsville, SC	Yes
2005	Noticias Tuyas	www.radiotierra.org (Project Not Online)	Hood River, OR	No
2005	Girls on Air Loisada Speaks	www.girlsclubworldwide.org/wp	New York, NY	Yes
2005	Hip Hop Speaks site	www.hiphopspeaks.org	Philadelphia, PA	No
2005	Twin Cities Daily Planet	www.tcdailyplanet.net	Minneapolis, MN	Yes
2005	Madison Commons	www.madisoncommons.org	Madison, WI	Yes
2005	Loudoun Forward	www.loudounforward.org	Loudoun, VA	No
2005	North Lawndale weblog	(Project Not Online)	Chicago, IL	No
2006	Community Correspondents Corps	appalshop.org/wmmt/node/2078	Whitesburg, KY	Yes
2006	Ethnic News Service	xpress.sfsu.edu/bayvoices	San Francisco, CA	Yes
2006	Chicago Talks	www.chicagotalks.org	Chicago, IL	Yes
2006	Philadelphia Neighborhoods	www.philadelphianeighborhoods.com	Philadelphia, PA	Yes
2006	Learning to Finish	www.learningtofinish.org	Charlottesville, VA	No
2006	Route 7 Report	www.j-newvoices.org/index.php/site/story_grantees06/route_7_report (PDFs only)	Athens, OH	No
2006	Monroe County Radio Project	www.whfi-fm.com (Project Not Online)	Morgantown, WV	No
2006	Great Lakes Echo (Wiki)	www.greatlakesecho.org, greatlakeswiki.org	East Lansing, MI	Yes
2006	Rural News Networks' Dutton Country Courier and Crow News	www.duttoncc.org www.crownews.net	Missoula, MT	Yes No
2006	Trenton Policy Options	www.policyoptions.org	Trenton, NJ	Yes
2007	New Castle NOW	www.newcastlenow.org	New Castle, NY	Yes
2007	Vermont Climate Witness	www.vermontclimatewitness.org	Burlington, VT	No
2007	Neighbor Media	www.neighbormedia.org	Cambridge, MA	Yes

Roster of New Voice Grantees 2005-2009

Year	Project	Website	Location	Active
2007	Greater Fulton News	www.greaterfultonnews.org	Richmond, VA	Yes
2007	The Eminent Domain	www.theeminentdomain.org	Brooklyn, NY	No
2007	Nuestro Tahoe	nuestrotahoe.ning.com	Reno, NV	No
2007	St. Paul Citydesk News	www.spnn.org/departments/access/saintpaulnewsdesk.html	St. Paul, MN	No
2007	Anansi's Web	www.sl-goml.blogspot.com	Gary, IN	No
2007	Newsdesk on Access SF	(Project Not Online; Station Closed)	San Francisco, CA	No
2007	Listen Up! Northwest Community Radio News	www.reclaimthemedias.org/communityradio	Seattle, WA	Yes
2008	Miami-Whitewater Valley News	www.mi-whinews.org	Oxford, OH	Yes
2008	Lexington Commons	www.kylexingtoncommons.org	Lexington, KY	Yes
2008	Stories That Fly	www.storiesthatfly.com	Kent, OH	Yes
2008	Green Jobs Philly	www.greenjobsphilly.org	Philadelphia, PA	Yes
2008	Immigration/KBUT	www.kbut.org/immigrations/Home.html	Crested Butte, MT	No
2008	Vet Venue	www.vetvenue.org	Columbia, SC	Yes
2008	Family Life Behind Bars	livesinfocus.org/prison	New York, NY	Yes
2008	The Appalachian Independent	www.appindie.org	Frostburg, MD	Yes
2008	10 Valley	10valley.ning.com	Los Angeles, CA	Yes
2009	Oakland Local	oaklandlocal.com	Oakland, CA	Yes
2009	Grand Avenue News	grandavenews.com	Miami, FL	Yes
2009	Intersections: The South Los Angeles Report	intersectionssouthla.org	Los Angeles, CA	Yes
2009	New Era News	www.neweranews.org	Boulder, CO	Yes
2009	MD School Information Mapping at Baltimore Brew	www.baltimorebrew.com (Project to be online soon)	Baltimore, MD	Yes
2009	Grosse Pointe Today	www.grossepointetoday.com	Grosse Pointe, MI	Yes
2009	Austin Bulldog	www.theaustinbulldog.org	Austin, TX	Yes

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The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation advances journalism in the digital age and invests in the vitality of communities where the Knight brothers owned newspapers. Since 1950, the foundation has granted more than \$400 million to advance quality journalism and freedom of expression. Knight Foundation focuses on projects that promote informed and engaged communities and lead to transformational change. For more, visit www.knightfoundation.org.

About J-Lab

J-Lab helps news organizations and citizens use digital technologies to develop new ways for people to participate in public life. It also administers the Knight Citizen News Network, J-Learning, the New Voices community media grant program and the McCormick New Media Women Entrepreneurs initiative. For more, visit www.j-lab.org.





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